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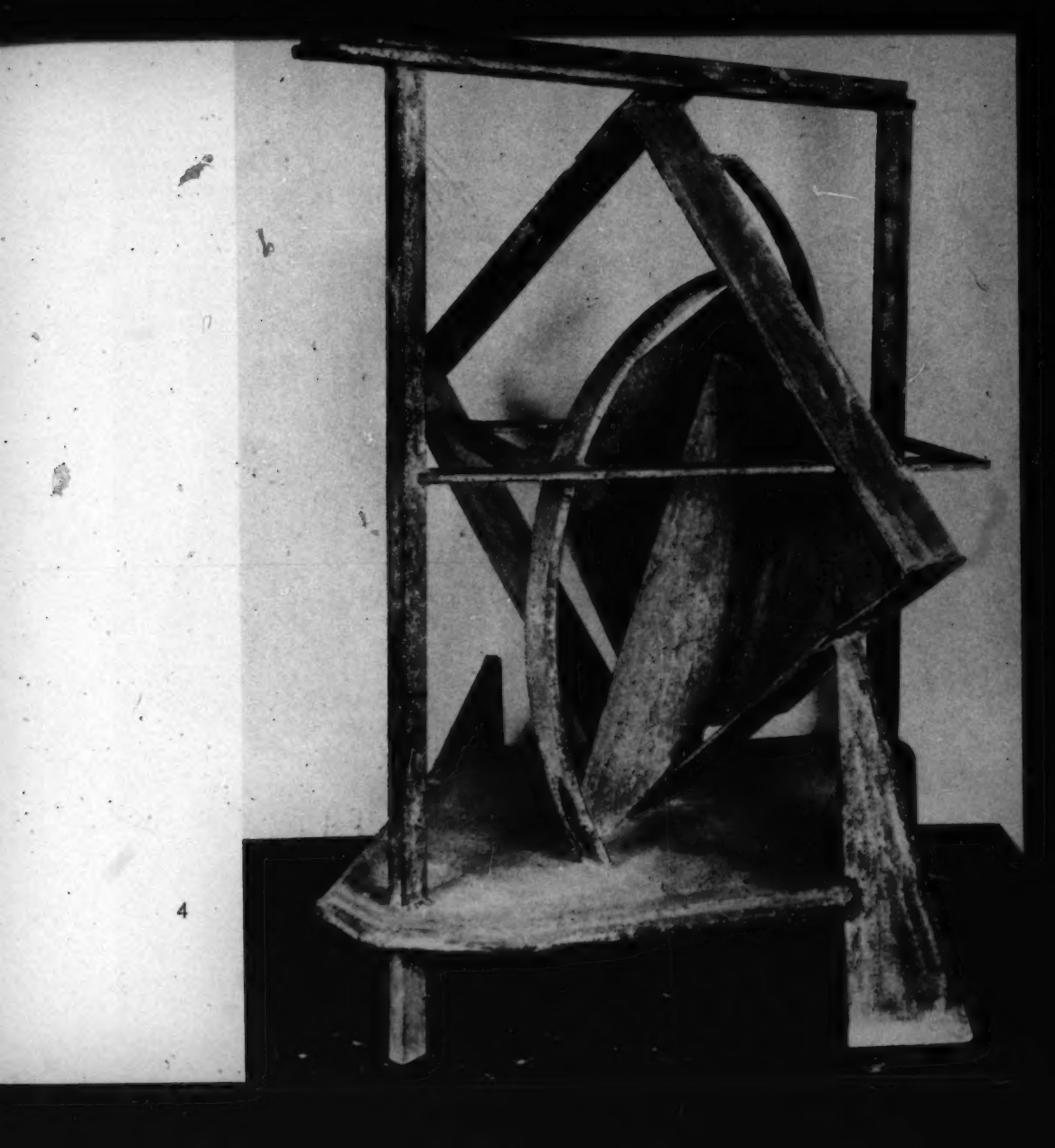
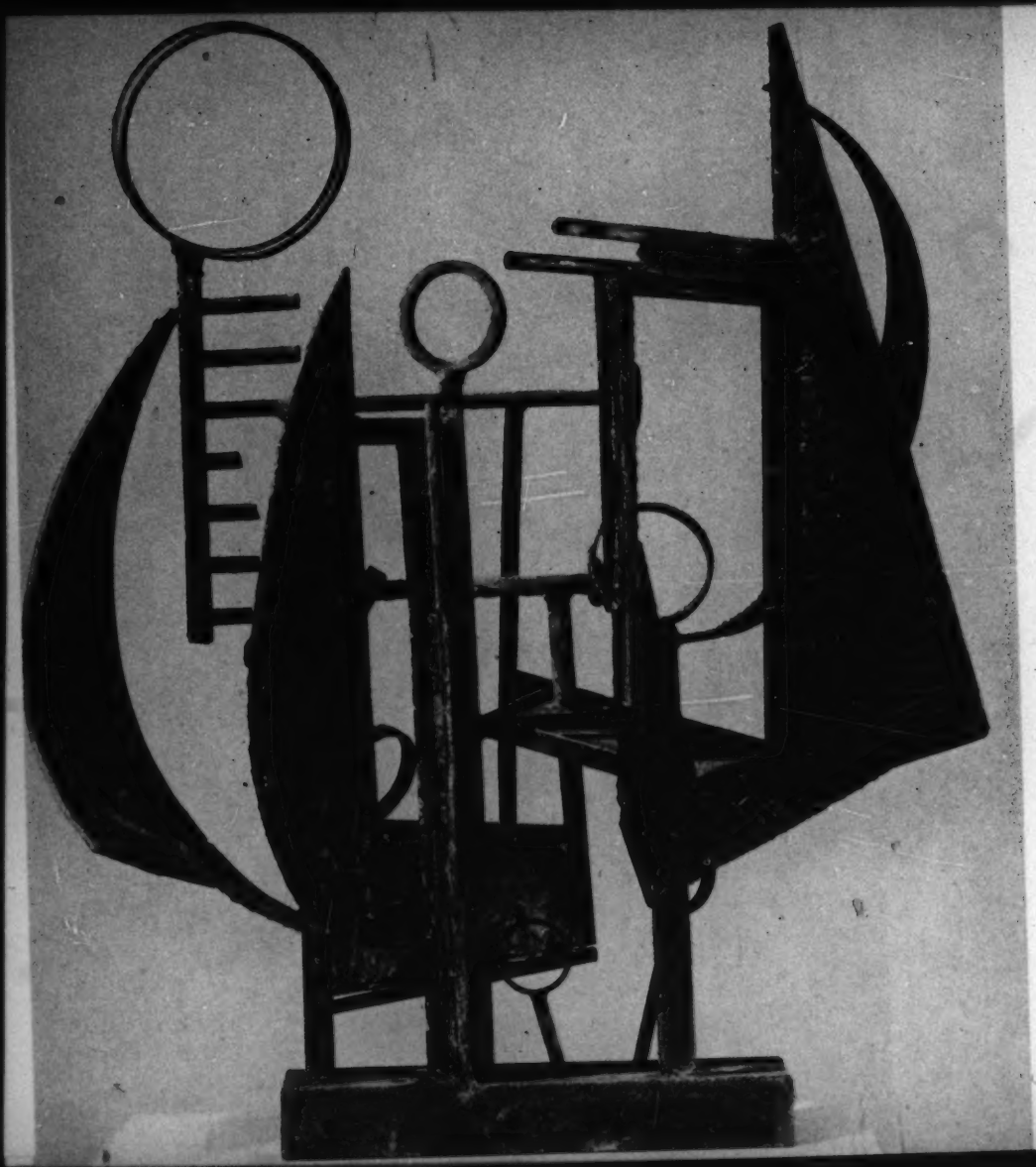
ROBERT JACOBSEN

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1966

ROBERT JACOBSEN

GALERIE CHALETTE - NEW YORK





THE SPACE IN THE SCULPTURE OF ROBERT JACOBSEN*

by

I. MEYERSON

Human space does not pre-exist. It is created, constructed. It is a framework established by human activities, technique, the sciences, the arts. One should really speak of this in the plural as spaces and frameworks. Because, on one hand, there is the complex history of the construction of the human space and, on the other hand, the space of the painter. A sculptor's space is not the space of a mathematician nor the engineer. It is historic change, simultaneous difference.

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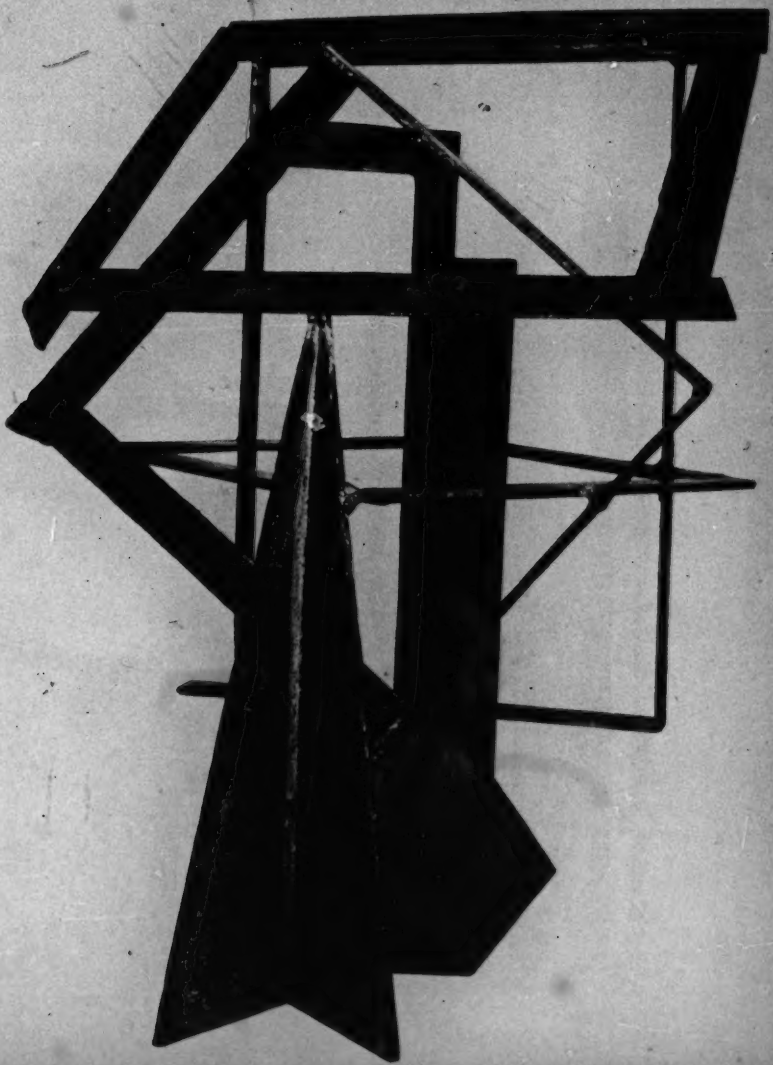
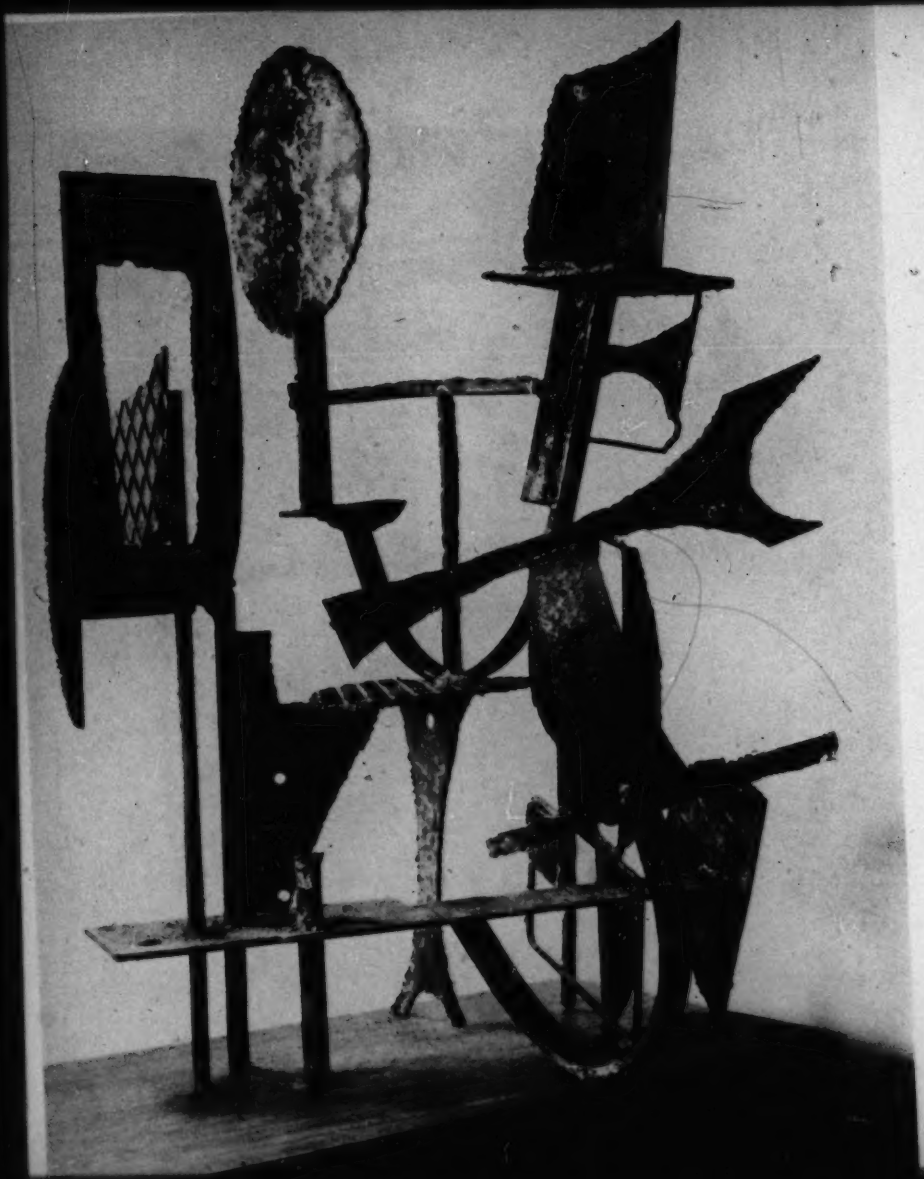
* Reprinted from the exhibition catalogue of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Nov.-Dec. 1955. Translated from the French text.

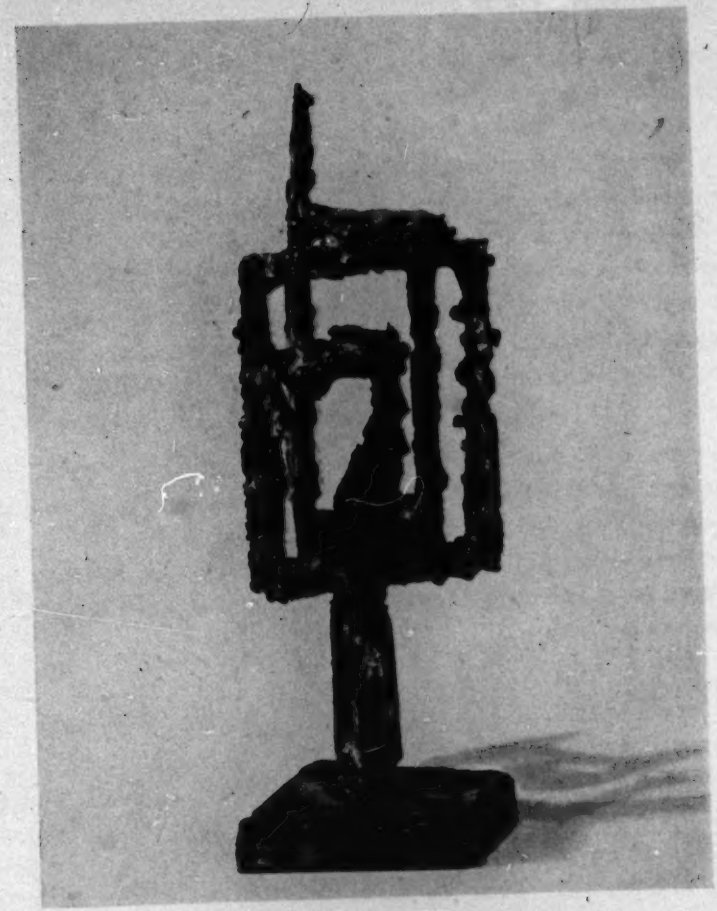




The need to create a new space is felt particularly by the sculptor; perhaps more so today than ever before. The space of sculpture is not just a simply organized space. It wants to be an autonomous world, a microcosmos. Search for form in sculpture is at the same time a search for an equilibrium of these new forms: equilibrium of its parts, equilibrium of the whole. And there is a communion between this microcosmos, this sculptured work, with the world which surrounds it: the macrocosmos. The surfaces of a sculpture play a dual rôle: they define and, therefore, terminate. But they reverberate, they extend and create relationships. A sculpture does not only organize the space which it occupies, but a large part of its environment as well.

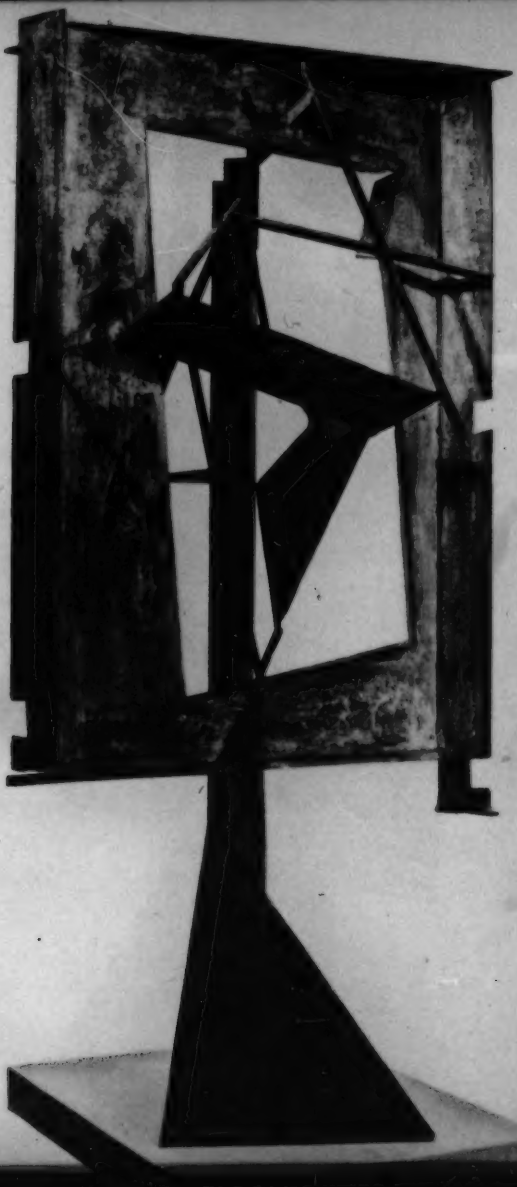
For a long time sculpture communicated itself through the bulk of its material and the language of its surface. Then it learned to speak through the language of its interior lines, translated by its mass. Perhaps it was this language of interior lines which led to the hollowing-out of bulk and the dialectic between solid mass and cavity. Today we have another new phase: Sculpture through the mass of air.

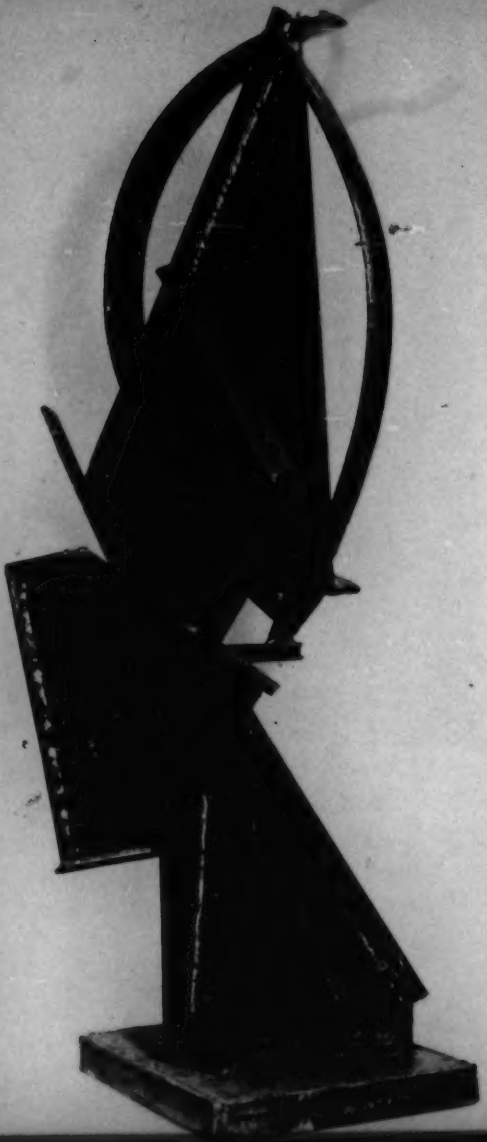
Robert Jacobsen does not just make holes in a solid mass. He does not transmute volumes into cavities, if they could have been rendered as bulky mass. The metal forms which he cuts out, guides, curves and assembles serve him to construct a new kind of expressive geometry. This is made of volumes which overlap, which are defined or suggested by blades or strips of metal reduced to a bare minimum.



These volumes are new volumes which a sculpture made of mass could not have achieved. Because these volumes intersect, penetrate and cut across, they bend and even reflect themselves. Enveloped forms cleave the mass of air. Bent and pointed triangles guide these volumes and turn them in different directions. They collide, yet they remain in equilibrium, because of the straight, ordinary planes which act as obstacles. Curved volumes are penetrated by straight volumes, marked by bands, strips and grills. Sometimes the volumes maintain an equilibrium. At other times the calculated imbalances set directions, suggest oscillation, flight, rotary motion, twisting.

Thus each work is at the same time a universe of forms in equilibrium and forms in motion. Each work is open to the space around it, forcing this space to participate in its order. One senses the innovation and power of this invention. It can only be expressed by this new language, by these abstract forms. A sculpture imitating the forms of nature runs the risk of drowning the solutions in the anecdote. But let us well understand the meaning of "abstract". Generally one contrasts it with "natural". But human "nature" is the world built by man; more and more constructed. In this sense Jacobsen has constructed a new human nature.





ROBERT JACOBSEN*

by

MICHEL RAGON

That Robert Jacobsen, who is known in Paris as a geometric abstractionist, seems to have suddenly switched to semi-humourous figuration comes as somewhat of a surprise. It is less of a surprise if one knows that Robert Jacobsen had already made "dolls"—as he called them—as early as 1935—1936, while he did not begin geometric sculpture until the end of 1948. In 1949 he began making "dolls" again for his own amusement. The story goes that one Christmas, not having enough money to buy a toy for his daughter, he conceived the idea of making one by welding together some old pieces of iron which lay about his studio. I have not asked Jacobsen to confirm this anecdote; it is too beautiful to doubt. At any rate it would explain the word "doll" applied to sculptures which go far beyond the conception of any toy, being works of such primitive power that Jacobsen reinstates himself as the "barbarous" sculptor he was in Denmark before being seduced by the purism of the Denise René group.

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* Exerpts from an article published in Cimaise, March-April 1962. Serie IX, No 1.

Born in Copenhagen on June 4, 1912, the son of a chimney sweep, he was a completely self-educated proletarian worker from the time of his first job as errand boy until he became a laborer in a factory. Robert Jacobsen claims he knew, all his life, that he would become a sculptor. In his childhood he created objects—cars, for example—and developed the passion for collecting which he still maintains.

About 1929—1930 he got acquainted with the circle of Danish artists. He understood nothing but felt a great "shock" in front of certain works. The exhibition of German expressionist work in Copenhagen in 1931—1932 was a revelation which was to transform his whole life and his point of view about art. Klee particularly enraptured him, as did Nolde. He discovered from them that art could be more than aestheticism, that it could be something akin to magic . . .

About 1937 an exhibition in Copenhagen which included work by Kandinsky, Miro, Mondrian etc. revealed abstract art to him. But in the years that followed he continued his involvement with magical problems. He met Asger Jorn who became his first artistic champion and urged him to exhibit.

His sculptures of 1936—1937, in polychromed wood, are closely related to primitive works of art of which he has an extraordinary collection. From

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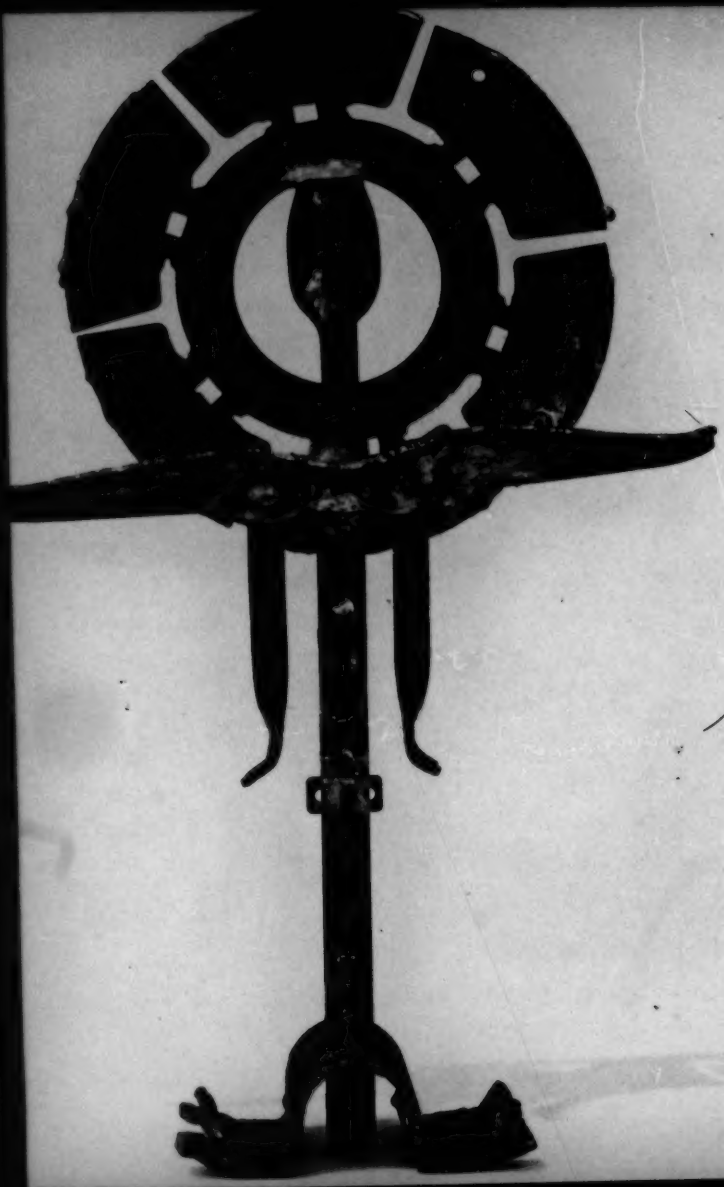
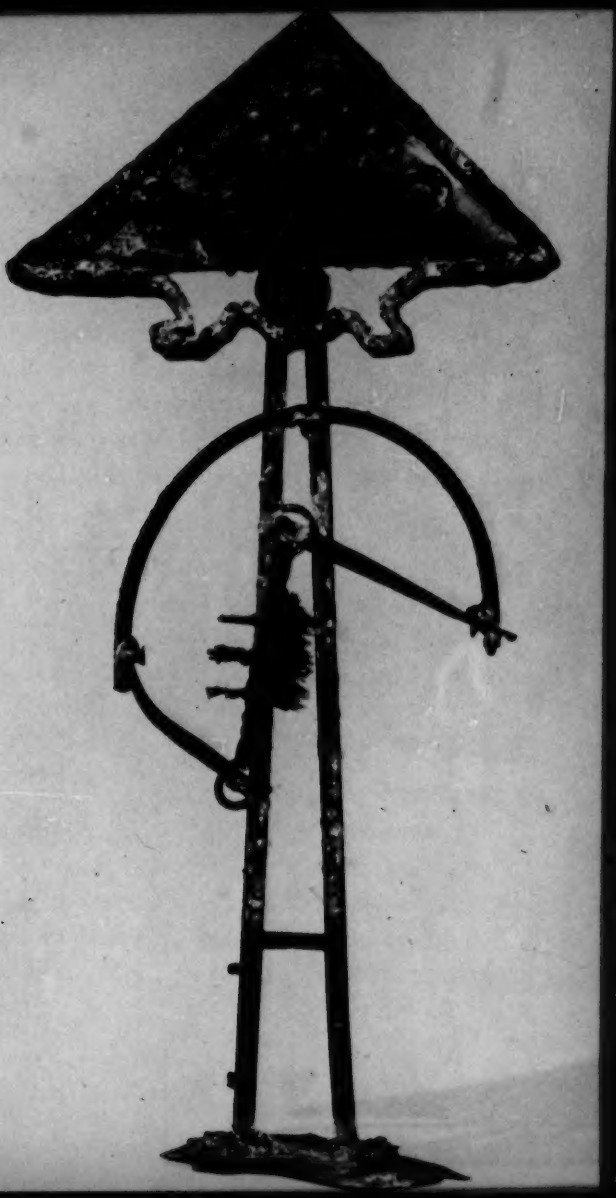


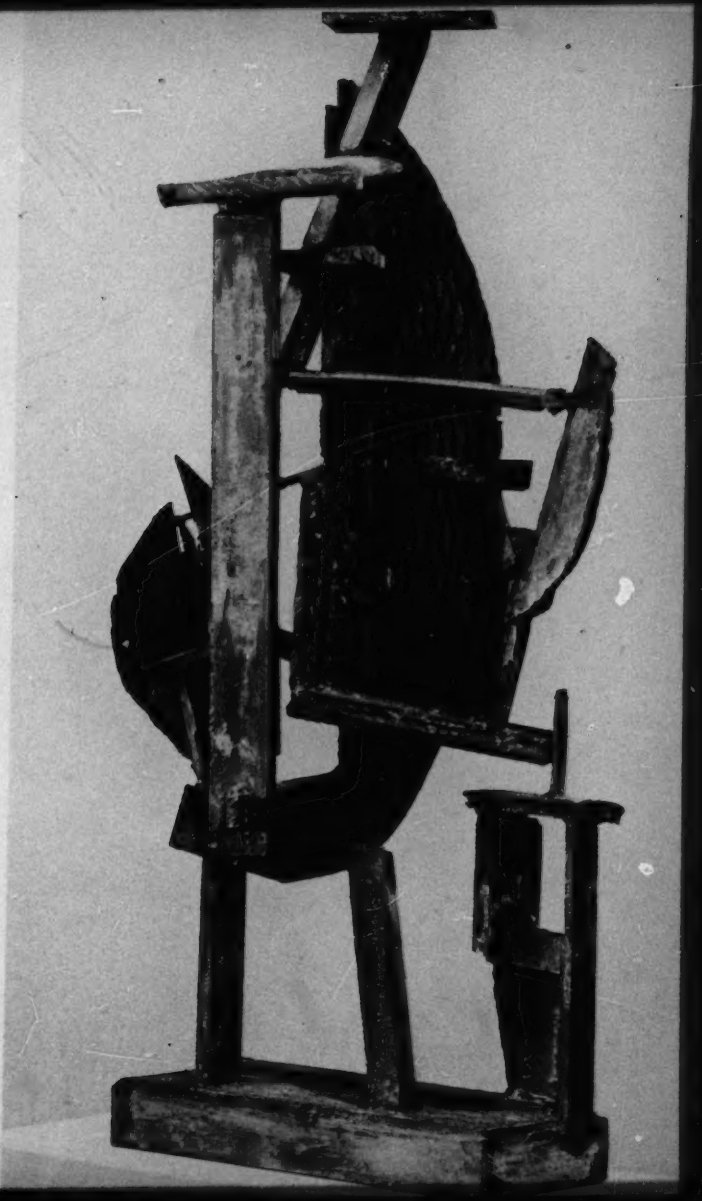


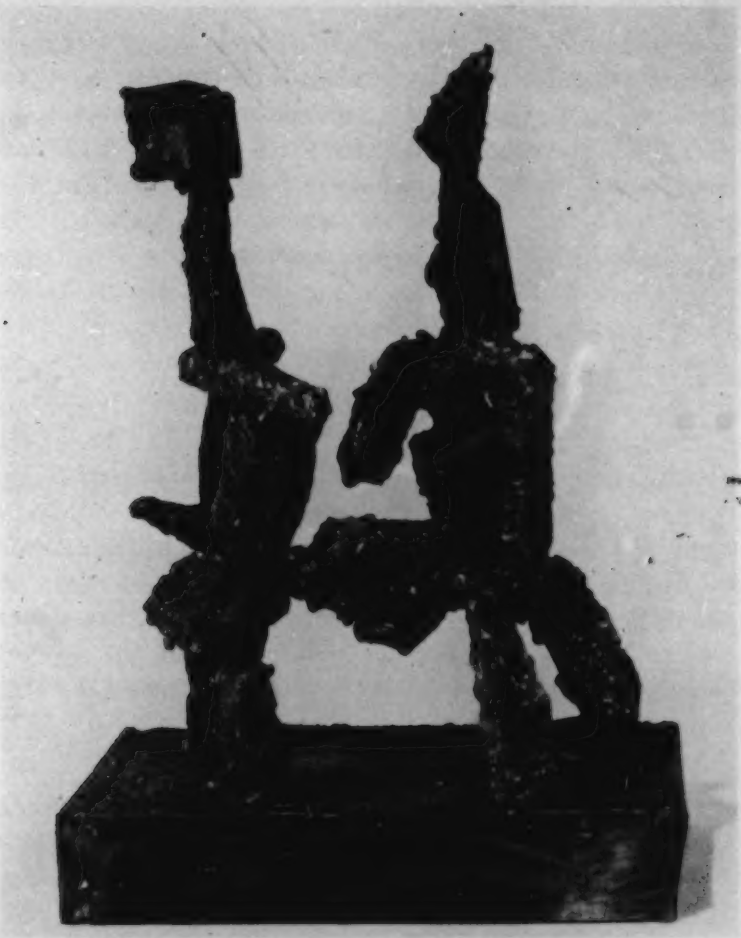
1942—1945 he sculptured fantastic animals in granite. In contrast, in 1947 he made very pure sculptures of marble and, the following year,—having moved to Paris—his first spatial sculptures of iron . . .

The chronology of the work of Robert Jacobsen is, therefore, difficult to establish. He mingles everything. He follows a direction full speed ahead, only to abandon it and chase after another idea, then going back to the first one. He is a voracious and powerful man who cannot content himself with systems, even those to which he has given impetus . . .

It is necessary to counterpoint. His collection of Negro and South Sea art has certainly played a large rôle. It is one of the most amazing gatherings of Dogon sculpture and Senufo objects that anyone has ever assembled. There is a close link between the desire to possess these objects, between their forms, and the necessity of the sculptor (for a long time considered an abstract artist) to create magical forms . . .

What Robert Jacobsen is trying to find is the soul of machinery, the poetry of metal already manufactured and "metamorphosed." His "dolls" are created with machine parts brought to him by friends. It is the crude form of the material just as it is given to him which inspires his figures. In the work of Jacobsen, the machine and primitive art are at the same time a duality and a counterpoint.





During the years of his purely geometric period, Robert Jacobsen worked tenaciously, dislodging forms contained in an imaginary cube. This cube, designed in the Absolute, was his discipline. It prevented him from giving in to his natural expression. It trained him to the extent that this sculptor never makes preparatory sketches and works directly in metal just as he once worked directly in stone. Mondrian's square changed spatially into a cube has been for Jacobsen a necessary "means of maturation". In command of his mastery, he could then return to a cruder expression, to the delirium of his imagination.

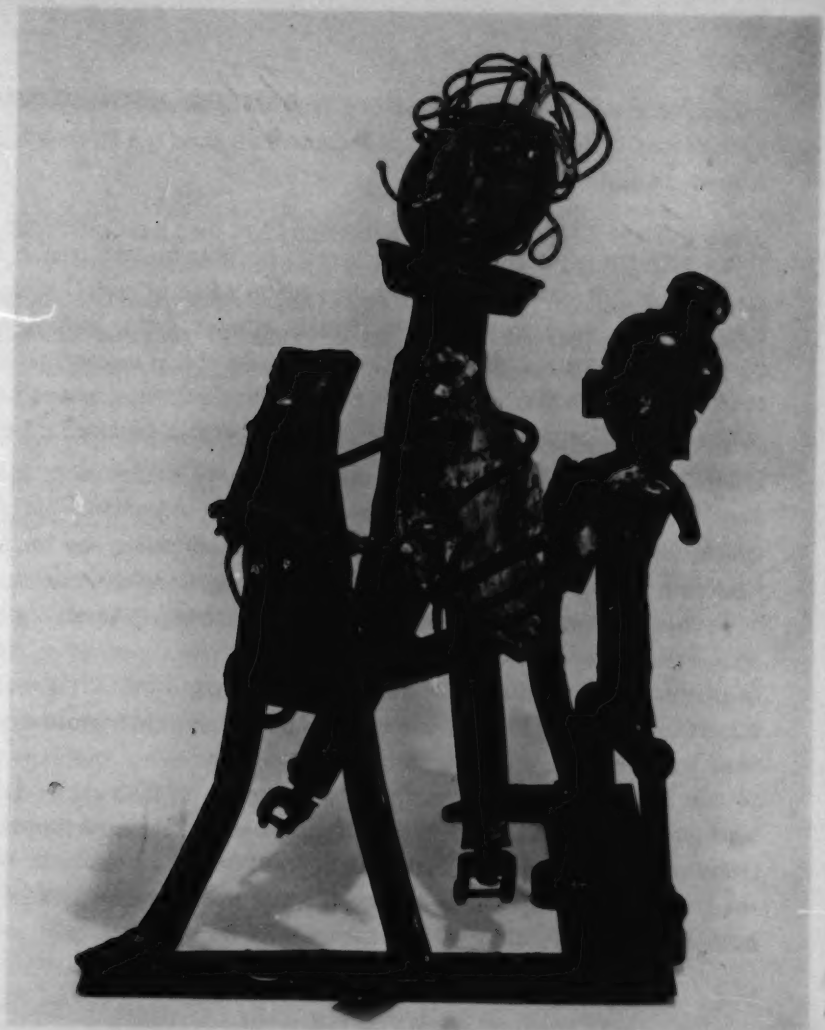
It is unnecessary to underline the fact that Jacobsen is one of those who promoted today's vogue of metal sculpture as the utilization of scrap iron. The dates speak for themselves. But we must nevertheless be precise in stating that by 1952 he had already used "cages,"—that is to say, a determined space enclosing a sculpture—and, by 1952—1953, grilles. He has also been occupied with movement, an interest which encourages him to use elements which pivot or, as in a recent sculpture, a flexible steel which curves and swings. This desire for movement incited him in 1949 to make an experimental film called REALITY A, with an accompaniment of "musique concrete" and a theme involving his iron sculptures.

This sculptor, so aware of the rhythms and images of today, has never been commissioned by an architect. In 1958—1960, however, he made for a factory in Jutland three big "dolls"—almost 12 feet high—to form a group entitled

"The Traitor and his Companions," or "Loke and his Companions." These big figures of copper, iron and stainless steel stand on a plot of green grass with their backs to the sea . . .

Since 1957 Jacobsen has lived on a vast estate near Paris where he has rather large studios which are already becoming too small for him. I knew him some time ago in the "heroic years," surviving somehow or other in the Maison Danoise at Suresnes, where Asger Jorn was literally dying of hunger. Jacobsen worked on the ground floor, Asger Jorn on the second. From 1947 to 1957, Robert Jacobsen lived precariously in this tiny studio which has now been destroyed. He earned his livelihood by repairing bikes and motorcycles, just as in Denmark his second trade—stone carving—had kept him going for a long time. From these bicycle and motorcycle parts have come many different characters. And it is a strange metamorphosis for these parts designed for traction, gears, etc. . . . to become figures of mythology both burlesque and tragic . . . I. Meyerson put it well when he wrote:

"Each figure has its own significance. This significance is so concentrated that, for want of another expression, one is tempted to say that each is an outcry, a particular outcry which expresses one of the aspects or moments in today's human tragedy. When one looks at them, one by one, in groups or all together, forty or fifty figures by Jacobsen (I do not like the word 'dolls' very well they are much more than dolls) one has the feeling of being in a world, a closed world, with its own laws—but which is also a transposed sum-



mary of our world, where a new one is forming through machinery and in spite of war. In this sense, the art of Jacobsen's figures is a Twentieth Century legend, an epic."

This epic is set in the mechanical landscape of contemporary man. It is made up of pieces of broken machinery. It is made of worn metal, of everyday metal. Hinges, keys, gears, chains, pedals, screws, bolts, springs, tins and bumpers finish their lives of usefulness by assembling themselves into the form of a man.—A man whose eyes are sometimes springs, whose head is a cogged wheel, legs a bent iron bar, hair a vegetable grinder, or better—in braids—a bicycle chain.

On the other hand, part of the completely abstract works are formed only from new metal—strips and plates, welded at right angles, form sculptures as severe as useless machines and spatial organizations which are strongly architectural. Recently, as we have emphasized, raw elements as scrap iron (elements formerly used only for the figures) have found their way into Robert Jacobsen's abstract sculptures. At the same time these sculptures have lost their frigidity. The metal is no longer polished, but worn by time or fire. Yet the individual assemblings lose none of their purity. Liberated from the limits of the square, Robert Jacobsen's abstract work is as lyrical, as brutal and as vigorous as his figures. Robert Jacobsen has now mastered what was for a long time a duality for him. His expressive force is now unified with the plastic demands of his art.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Robert Jacobsen was born in Copenhagen on June 4th 1912. His interest in sculpture manifested itself at an early age. But he never received any formal art education and is completely self taught. He executed his first wood sculptures when he was only 18 years old and had his first one-man exhibition at the Hansen Gallery in Copenhagen in 1944.

The decisive moment of Jacobsen's life and career occurred when, in 1947, he moved to Paris and joined the Galérie Denise René where, for almost 10 years, he exhibited regularly in one-man exhibitions as well as with other members of the group. During those years he exhibited also in the Salon des Realitées Nouvelles, the Salon de Mai and was a frequent contributor to exhibitions in other galleries throughout France and Europe.

In 1954, only 10 years after his first one-man exhibition in Copenhagen, Jacobsen was honored by a one-man show at the "Palais des Beaux-Arts" in Brussels.

In 1957 Jacobsen associated himself with the Galerie de France. Many exhibitions in museums and other public institutions followed such as the exhibition "Poliakoff-Jacobsen" at the Kunsthalle in Basel, "50 Years of Modern Art" at the "Exposition Universelle Internationale" of Brussels, an exhibition

together with Arp, Magnelli and Hartung at the "Musée des Beaux-Arts" in Liège, one-man exhibitions at the Museum of Odense and the Museum of Louisiana (Denmark) and the Musée de La Chaux-de-Fonds (Switzerland). In 1959 Jacobsen participated in the "Biennale" of Antwerp, the "Documenta" in Kassel, the "Pittsburgh International". And one year later he was given the important one-man exhibition by the "Stedelijk Museum" of Amsterdam.

In 1961 Jacobsen had his first one-man show in America, when the Kootz Gallery presented his humorous figures which had become known as the Jacobsen "Dolls" and had been shown for the first time in 1957 by the Galerie de France.

Years of great activity followed. Again Jacobsen was invited to participate in the "Pittsburgh International". The Munich "Academie der Bildenden Kunst" appointed him professor in 1962. Museum exhibitions all over France, Italy, Germany and Scandinavia were taking place. And Jacobsen could also be seen in America. His work was being shown in St. Petersburg (Florida), Dallas (Texas), Darthmouth (New Hampshire).

In 1966 Jacobsen represented Denmark at the XXXIIIrd "Biennale of Art" in Venice where he was awarded the First Prize for sculpture.

At this time one-man exhibitions at the Museums of Louisiana (Denmark), Bergen and Oslo (Norway) and Arnheim (Holland) are in preparation.

WORKS IN PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris (France)
Museum of Modern Art, Sao Paulo (Brazil)
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (Holland)
Museum of Art, Stockholm (Sweden)
Museum of Art, Liège (Belgium)
Musée de La Chaux-de-Fonds (Switzerland)
Museum of Odense (Denmark)
Museum of Copenhagen (Denmark)
Museum of Modern Art, Vienna (Austria)
Museum of Wuppertal (Germany)
Musée de Grenoble (France)
Neue Pinakothek, Munich (Germany)
The Haag Museum (Holland)
Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh (U.S.A.)
Albright-Knox-Gallery, Buffalo (U.S.A.)
and others

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Jean Dewasne: "Le Sculpteur." Scripta; Copenhagen, 1950

Léor Dégand: "L'Art d'Aujourd'hui," Serie 2, Nr. 3, Paris 1951

Julien Alvard: "Robert Jacobsen." Témoignage pour l'Art abstrait; Paris, 1952

Karl G. Hulten: "Robert Jacobsen." L'Art d'Aujourd'hui, Serie 4, Nr. 7; Paris, 1951

Pierre Francastel: "Les Sculpteurs Célèbres." Paris, 1954

Romero Brest: "Ver y Estima." Buenos Aires, 1954

Roger Bordier: "Robert Jacobsen." Premier Salon de la Sculpture abstraite; L'Art d'Aujourd'hui, Nr. 8; Paris, 1954

I. Meyerson: "Figures. Quand le fer parle." Paris, 1957

Edouard Jaguer: "Poétique de la Sculpture." Paris, 1960

Werner Hofmann: "Scultura di Robert Jacobsen." La Biennale di Venezia, Venice, 1960

Jean Laude: "Paroles Peintes." Paris, 1962

Ernst Mentze: "Robert Jacobsen," Berlinske Vorlag, Copenhagen, 1961

Ejner Johansen: "The Sculptor Robert Jacobsen." Venice Biennale, 1966

CATALOGUE OF THE EXHIBITION*

ALL SCULPTURES ARE WELDED IRON

1	The War	1952	21⅝"
2	Chohakoa	1954	15"
*3	Ideomotorisk Problem	1954	25⅝"
*4	Ideomotorisk Problem Nr. 3	1955	33½"
5	Gamle Filip	1955	27⅝"
6	Absalon	1955	30¼"
*7	Small abstract Sculpture (Farvel)	1956	10¾"
*8	Idol with Hammers	1957	19⅝"

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* Works marked with an asterisk are illustrated

*9	The Emperor's Tailor	1957	28"
*10	The Miller, his Son and the Donkey	1957—58	18 1/2"
*11	Faithful Harmony	1958	42"
*12	Constructed Spark	1958	35"
13	Man with Key	1959	30 3/8"
14	Man with Snake	1959	26 7/8"
*15	Polychromed Sculpture	1960	102 1/4"
16	Precolumbian II	1960	51 7/8"
*17	Machine Pacifique	1962	45 5/8"
*18	Liberated Space	1962	42"
*19	Aggressive Structure	1964	43 3/8"
20	Spontaneous Construction	1965	13 3/4"
*21	Chevalier de Cape et d'Epée	1965	26 5/8"
*22	Trick Riding	1965	15"
23	Pradinat II	1965	42 1/2"
*24	The Battle	1965	19 1/4"
*25	Icarus	1965	19 3/4"
*26	Eternal Duel	1966	12 1/4"
27	Minilove	1966	7 3/4"
28	Le Roi des Aulnes	1966	10 1/4"
29	Temptation	1966	10 5/8"
30	Challenge	1966	13"
*31	Microcosmos	1966	9 1/4"
32	The Future	1966	13 3/8"

Photographs by:
Robert E. Mates and Paul Katz
Galerie de France
Pierre Joly-Vera Cardot

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